



Reading

Rev. Laurel Hallman, *Images for our Lives*

The problem with language is that those words, those simple individual words are slippery little devils. They don't stay put. I remember my shock, as a junior high student, when I used the word "queer" thinking it meant "odd" and discovering to my dismay that it was a pejorative label for a homosexual.

I was horrified partly because I was in junior high and partly because I hadn't meant what people thought I meant. But I was most horrified that the word didn't mean what I thought it did. Until that point I had assumed that words meant what they meant – that words stood still. They stood firm against all the vicissitudes of life. But in that moment, my faith in language was shaken. Words could add meaning, they could change meaning, and they could turn on you. I was shocked.

And then I was to discover that a word, for example, "God" could become the victim of what Alfred Whitehead called "Misplaced Concreteness." Over time, words could lose their rich, metaphorical, living depth and become concrete – rigid and lifeless. The imaginative vitality could ebb away. The word God could die.

What we need to do, then, is to break open these concretized words, to point toward that small portion of reality that they have experienced. We're talking about the religious existential dimension of life, not rigid definitions. We're talking about the products of the imagination here.

I once heard a simple story about a Russian Orthodox icon. The priest explained that the value of the icon was in its ability to teach people who sat with it. "They didn't analyze it," he said. "It taught them." ("Not very American," he added.) That simple explanation changed how I thought about the traditional words of Western religion. I couldn't drop them. They had evoked too much for too many people over too long a time, and I needed to stay connected to the human struggles and the human understandings they represented, if only to inform my own. The word God might have become concretized. The word God might have even died. But I could not ignore all that it represented before it was rigidified into a state of rigor mortis.

Sermon

It had been a quiet afternoon in Emergency at St. Michael's Hospital in downtown Toronto. That was, until one of our homeless regulars, Nick, came in. He was unusually aggressive and paranoid that afternoon. The staff tried everything to calm him down, and when they ran out of options, they did what they often did in situations like this; they called in the big guns. They called in the chaplain. Somehow we had a way of getting the hardest cases, the ones no one had been able to crack. Maybe it's because we had no agenda. Maybe it's because it appeared as if we didn't work in the realm of the rational.



I had been a chaplain for exactly four months and honestly, Nick scared the living daylights out of me. Nick was convinced that the second coming of Christ was happening right there, right then. Angels were fighting overhead, swords slicing through the air; the flames of hell were lapping at our feet. Jesus was coming, and we better be sure we were on the right side of God's judgment. He went on and on yelling at me about the vengeance of the Lord.

I didn't have a clue what to do. Unitarian Universalists aren't really into the second coming. We're not concerned about damnation. We live in the here and now. I didn't feel like there was anything from my Unitarian Universalist faith to help me so I just sat there, silent, incapable.

Later I told my supervisor that I didn't think there was anything I could do for Nick because I was a Unitarian Universalist. It would be better to send a Christian chaplain next time. "What do you mean?" he said. "Have you ever been paralyzed with fear?" "Yes." "Have you ever felt completely helpless?" "Yes." "Have you ever felt like the stakes were so high that you didn't know which way to turn?" "Yes." "Then you go back there and sit with Nick. You're the chaplain. You figure it out."

So I went back.

"Are you feeling afraid Nick?"

"Yes."

"Are you feeling helpless?"

"Yes."

"I've felt those things too. Are you afraid you're going to hell?"

Nick broke into tears. "Yes."

"Those are pretty high stakes."

And we started to talk. It still wasn't easy. I wasn't used to the language of devils and demons and Christs who wield swords of judgment. That's not part of my theology. But if I could resist what Alfred Whitehead, in our reading, called "Misplaced Concreteness," of assuming that words can mean one and only one thing, then I had some hope of relating to the human being before me. If I could look into what he was saying, all of it was a metaphor for the struggle in Nick's soul.

Think about words like salvation, God, redemption, judgment, Christ. If you think of them in terms of misplaced concreteness, they're pretty uncomfortable; at least they are for many religious progressives, which is what we are. But if you see them as slippery little devils, to use Laurel Hallman's words, all kinds of things become possible.

For many of us, this might be a new way of looking at religion. It's pretty easy to look around and see churches and people who have taken religious language and tried to make it mean only one thing. Unfortunately, it's not just Christians who lock their words in through misplaced concreteness. Unitarian Universalists are just as good at it. For many years, most Christian language was more or less purged from Unitarian Universalism. Anything too Christian was distrusted, seen as a vestige of rigid unbending superstition and blind faith.

We had some good reasons for this. Many of us have experienced Christian language being used in ways that damaged us. It hurt too much to hear it. If those words meant those rigid judgmental hurtful things,



there was no place for them in a religion like Unitarian Universalism, with its openness to diversity and commitment to tolerance.

I don't think we can understate the spiritual damage that has been done by forms of Christianity wedded to this concreteness. In so many ways, Unitarian Universalism has been defined by that kind of wounding. We have often become a healing ministry for those damaged by other religions, and will probably continue to be. But I wonder, if our churches are defined only in relation to that damage, who are we? How well does it serve people who grew up Unitarian Universalist and don't have that experience? How well does it serve our children who we're trying to raise in a different way? How well does it serve people who are no longer rejecting their faith of origin, but seeking some reconciliation with it?

This is the thing. Words don't stand still. They never have. Many of those traditional words, when you go back to their Hebrew roots, don't mean at all what they mean in Christianity. And in fact, they don't even mean the same things in conservative Christianity and liberal Christianity.

We have often misjudged and misinterpreted Christianity by applying the same misplaced concreteness that many Christians have, and thus cut ourselves off from the good parts of a religion that for many of us is our religious heritage. In doing so, we have actually gone against one of the foundational principles of Unitarian Universalism, openness and acceptance of diversity.

As many of you know, I've started a Prayer Service here at Emerson Chapel on the last Wednesday of every month. A woman emailed me and thanked me for bringing prayer into the church. "I pray," she said. "Especially when things are hard. Don't tell anyone though." Why would she be so afraid of people knowing she prays? Another told me, "I have a rich personal spiritual life. I've just come to accept I can't bring that to my church." How did this come to be? Several of our young people who are theist don't know if they belong here. What kind of dogma or creed is lurking under the surface of Unitarian Universalism, silencing the true diversity that exists in our people? We are supposed to be a creedless religion. No dogma. But sometimes we act otherwise.

It's like we are as a religion standing in that room with Nick, paralyzed, unable to say a thing, waiting to get away. In our fear of traditionally religious language, have we become defenders of misplaced concreteness? Are we part of what is killing religion?

Now I want to be clear here. I'm not saying we should go back to being Christian. That would be impossible, not even desirable. Nor am I discounting the very real hurt that some of you are carrying and working through. But we need to think about what it means to embrace diversity. We need not just to say it, we need to live it.

I wonder if there's a way for us to lighten up, to not take ourselves so seriously, and stop worrying about fitting in or hurting other people's feelings and just be who we are? There are so many places in life – from our families to our work places and our neighborhoods – where we have to hold back. Do we really need that from our church? Part of what makes the conversation about traditional language so hard is that we feel the stakes are so high, like if we don't get our words exactly right, or if we don't know exactly



what someone means by what they say, we'll get all trapped again, pulled into something that isn't us! Well, what about trusting each other a bit? What about cutting each other some slack and cutting loose?

Many years ago, I did improvisational comedy. You get on a stage with no script and make stuff happen. Improvisation comedy looks like a lot of fun, but it's actually very hard work and demands a lot of training. The main lesson you learn, over and over again, is how to accept. Improvisational comedy depends completely on how good you are at receiving what's offered.

Let me give you an example. Say your partner says to you, "Man, you look rough! What happened to you?" That person has made an offer. If you say, "Oh nothing. I'm fine," You just blocked that person's offer. But, if you say, "My dog ran away! We have to find him!" You've received the offer and moved the plot forward. That's how improv works. Offer, receive, offer, receive. Always working with it.

I've been thinking about how we could use the lessons of improv to get us out of this seriousness rut when it comes to using traditional language and to have some fun.

Say, you're talking to a neighbor, and they ask you, "Do Unitarian Universalists believe in the Bible?" Ever been asked this? Pretty serious question and easy to block. "No. We don't believe in the Bible." True, if you're thinking that the only way to look at the Bible is the infallible word of God. How could you play with this question? Let's try it again. "Do you believe in the Bible?" "Well yeah! I believe that is one hell of a book written by a bunch of well intentioned people trying to figure out the mysteries of life!" Whole different energy isn't it? The first answer closed doors. There is only one kind of Bible and we don't believe in that. The second answer is way more playful, and also still true! Sure, we believe in the Bible, and this the Bible we believe in!

Let's try another one. "Does your church believe in Jesus?" Another loaded serious question. Easy to block. "We don't believe in Jesus." What we're saying is there's only one kind of Jesus and it's not for us. End of discussion. How could you have fun with this question? Let's start again. "Does your church believe in Jesus?" "Well, of course! He had this radical message that was so profound that hardly anyone has been able to follow it!" You've taken what's offered and made it yours, not once compromising who you are.

Let's try some others. "Does your church believe in salvation?" Another loaded question, that is if there's only one definition of salvation, meaning that you get into heaven. But what about breaking away that concrete prison. "Yes, we believe in salvation. Our souls are already saved so we're not worried about that. Our question is, is your life saved? As a Unitarian Universalist, I have been saved from a meaningless life. My life has purpose and direction now." So basically you're saying, "Yes, I believe in salvation and this is the salvation I believe in."

Last one. "Does your church believe in redemption?" Hard question to answer if the only definition of redemption is being saved from our own inner depraved nature. Unitarian Universalists don't believe in a depraved human nature. We believe that we are capable of good and evil, and our religious call is to choose good. So how could you reframe redemption into that understanding of human nature? "Yes. I believe in redemption. I've made a lot of bad decisions in my life, and I have paid for those decisions,



and unfortunately others have too. As a Unitarian Universalist I believe that I have the ability to make different decisions. I can live a renewed life, turning away from old ways of being that brought harm to myself and to others. So you better believe that I believe in redemption."

See how powerful it can be to accept what is offered, rather than block it? Might it be possible to say that in this kind of refreshing openness, that we might find the seeds of our own salvation? The seeds of salvation from a mindset that have put concrete barriers between us and our true potential?

There are some among us, perhaps you are one, who fears that if we use traditional religious language we're going to compromise who we are, we're going to become like those churches many of us have left. There are some among us, perhaps you are one of them, that fears you are going to lose your church if we use traditional religious language. This would be true if that traditional language meant the same thing it meant in the churches you left. This would be true if Unitarian Universalism ever turned away from its foundation of acceptance and diversity.

Honestly, I think it comes down to trust. Do we trust one another? Are we ready to build the beloved community? Are we willing to take risks and make mistakes? We will never get it perfect, but we will always move forward if we're willing to move together and accept what comes before us, to walk into places we might not have gone on our own, and to forgive ourselves and each other if it doesn't work out as planned.

There is no script in life. You just have to get on the stage and be ready to work with whatever comes your way. With enough love and honesty, and just the right amount of playfulness, we'll get to where we're supposed to be going. Promise.